New Fiction in Varied Forms

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON. By Mary S. Watts. The Macmillan Company.

LIKE its predecessors, this newest offering by Mrs. Watts is a largely planned, roomy affair. She believes in beginning at the foundation—and it must be a broad, solid piece of honest masonry—before she raises the superstructure; nor does she follow the analogy of the modern steel frame skyscraper, which sometimes appears to complete its upper floors before filling in the skeleton. The walls of her house rise steadily, in due order, without eccentricities. It is a fashion nowadays a little uncommon, but it is a sound method. One suspects, too, that the resulting edifice is very likely to far outlast some showier, hastier constructions. Nor is there anything at all stodgy or heavy about it—the lines of it are beautiful, harmonious, satisfying. There are, indeed, very few living writers of fiction in English whose artistry is as fine as hers.

In this case she does not go as deeply into her hero's ancestry as in some of her earlier studies, but we get fairly full length portraits of his parents, especially the mother, of his brothers and sister, an important Uncle John, and, in general, the surroundings of his boyhood. Cleve—more fully, Grover Cleveland Harrod—is a "sport" from a very ordinary, nice, intelligent but stuffily "bourgeois" family, in a middle sized Ohio city. The boy has aspirations and more than a touch of genius. At the very outset we meet one of the subtlest passages in the book, in the fine insight of Mrs. Watts's analysis of the boy, the "budding genius," and of his mother's well meant but pitifully inept tampering with his psychic insides. Cleve naturally took himself very seriously. "Youth," says Mrs. Watts, "lacks the two main easements of life—a sense of humor and the spirit of compromise—fortunately, for otherwise how could Youth, which does everything, do anything?" Poor Cleve—most of the rest of the story deals with his painful acquirement of the necessary "spirit of compromise," to his ultimate destruction—his enforced bowing down in the House of Rimmon.

It is a profoundly melancholy book, yet not altogether depressing. The pessimism of its main lines is not unrelieved. There are correctives, and although the hue of the whole is somber it is not a despairing book. Cleve's career ends in a spiritual wreckage, but even so, one need not despair of him or feel that the evil conditions to which he falls a victim are necessarily incurable or permanent. And there is George Tarvey, the cook and soldier, who is a useful companion picture, or contrast, to Cleve, the unhappy poet who is driven astray from his ideals. George holds fast to his ideal, although he would never have dreamed of putting it that way to himself, and he is, after all, a more enduring strand in our body politic than the poisonous Delmar, whose features are "of that noble Babylonish cast familiar on Broadway." So long as America produces its Tarveys we need not quite despair of a wholesome future.

Cleve's career, in brief, may be summed up as a very slow, painful process of finding himself, a not very well aimed attempt to follow the noblest ideals, crowned at last by what looks to be an artistic success, but turns itself into failure, and finally a lapse into sheer prostitution of his genius to make a living and to take care of his unfortunately chosen wife. He begins by hitching his wagon to a lofty star and ends by writing salacious plays for a clever Jew manager who "gives the public what it wants." The story leaves him, after his wife's death, at the moment of the great financial success of his second debased play, when he has also just been reminded of his boyhood:

"Cleve stood gazing, seeing nothing. Ah, that boy! What had become of him, with his innocent courage, his high belief, his proud, clean heart? With a hand thrust deep into one pocket he touched the crepey surface of a bill, the outermost one of a roll—a symbolically soiled bill, worn with handling. Some one discreetly jogged his arm. . . . 'Wake up! You're wanted!' Cleve went out before the curtain."

The long road to this successful failure is followed in the book with a wealth of fine incident and among a large company of fellow travelers. It is a steady progress, a full record; from his father's death, which interfered with the completion of his education; his work in the "Sunshine Bakery," his brief life as a soldier, which did not get him beyond the training camps; his next phase as a hangeron in New York's literary "Bohemia," his service as a bartender in a transmogrified saloon where he serves as a soda counter clerk, his escape as steward on a Bermuda liner, followed by a period as general handy man in a Bermuda hotel, and his discovery there by an "arrived" literary expert, a successful novelist who finally guides him back to New York and real success. It is a richly woven tapestry of narrative and character development.

While he is still pottering about the Bermuda hotel he falls deeply in love with an extraordinary lady, a divorcee and real widow, who is wealthy, highly placed socially and much older than Cleve. She is not beautiful, but has an uncanny charm, an irresistible fascination. Edith is a genuine "creation"; one must look far to find a parallel in recent fiction. She calls for some believing on the part of the reader, but she is real; in no way a caricature. She is moved by the handsome young Cleve, and there is a strange love scene between them, but she will have none of him. She does operate to arouse his ambition by her scorn of his feeble pottering about. "If I loved a man," she snaps at him, "he might scrub gutters—but he'd have to be a man. Go be somebody and do something!"

But before Cleve can act upon that prescription he becomes helplessly entangled with the lovely, appealing, delicate young Sophy Tarvey, who is passionately in love with him. He does not love her, but feels that he must marry her. He is fond of her, and her brother George, the cook who worked with Cleve years before in the "Sunshine Bakery," is his best friend. Edith has cast him off—so he marries poor Sophy.

It seems to be necessary for the youthful genius to marry the wrong woman. In fact, he usually does so; fiction here is but copying a common brute fact of life. In this case the usual unhappy results follow, without anything spectacular about them, and Mrs. Watts gives us a poignantly moving picture of the unhappy young wife, the misery of the misplaced woman, who has a dim consciousness that she is misplaced, but is helpless.

Cleve, too, is helpless, and finally falls a victim to the blandishments of the Hebraic manager, who insists upon altering his play by cheapening, vulgarizing it and bringing it down to what he judges to be the popular level. This section of the book of course is the spot where Mrs. Watts turns the whole broadside of her heavy artillery on the degeneracy of the modern stage. Each shot is well aimed; there are no misses, but, unfortunately, one feels that the target will, none the less, remain quite unaware of it. In the words of the great man for whom Cleve was named, "it is a condition and not a theory that confronts us."

However, Mrs. Watts may have added something of weight to the wide protest already made. She has at least furnished new ammunition for future assailants of the stage citadels, but, as the book itself implies, it is probably a matter of slow popular education if we are ever to have better things.

Mrs. Watts has done one very unusual thing in this book. She has managed to present not merely a literary genius as hero but also another genuinely alive literary character. Generally the prodigy or even the ordinary man of letters, or woman writer, in fiction is a queer creature, neither fish, flesh nor fowl; recognizable as genius or author merely because he wears the proper label. But Mrs. Watts makes Cleve and Mr. Cook, the novelist, living human beings as well as writers, and one is also willing entirely to believe that Cleve is a true genius. It is a very subtle piece of work in that respect especially. There is nothing *outre* or unduly eccentric about either character; no exaggeration or absurdity such as often crops up in the handling of such people even in the work of pretty good craftsmen.

This success is doubtless but a part of Mrs. Watts's deepest and most important qualification as a critic of life—her entire sanity and normalness of vision, her always sound judgment and fairness in appraisal. That she often adds brilliancy of manner, incidental flashes of fire to this steady flame is, after all, a minor thing. Others are capable of fireworks, but few of our living writers equal her in the breadth and accuracy of her vision. She sees life whole, and gives us not a lurid selected spot of it, but a large cross section—large enough to include most things that really matter.

H. L. PANGBORN.

THE RED HOUSE MYSTERY. By A. A. Milne. E. P. Dutton & Co.

HOPE springs eternal in the human breast. Every true reader goes on from book to book hoping that one day he will come across the perfect detective story. Now and then he feels he has—and the reader who takes up A. A. Milne's "The Red House Mystery" will know that he has. Here it is! Read it and be mystified, be thrilled, be puzzled, be sure you have the right answer, and then not so sure, and then sure that it is another answer, and then again in doubt. And at the end be everlastingly surprised and thoroughly content. For the end is all it should be, and it is there where the unperfect detective tale so often slips up and disappoints the hopeful reader.

In spite of being a murder story, it is also a charming story, and it is told with the most delightful art, with a careless grace and ease, as though, after all, it wasn't much—and yet it is the perfect detective story! The people in it are just the kind of people you like and feel at home with and want to know lots more about and spend week ends with and all. Take Bill. Could there be a jollier young fellow than Bill? Or Anthony, for that matter, the amateur detective himself. One simply has to know more of Anthony to trust that Mr. Milne isn't going to leave us without much more of Anthony's society. What a man he is, with his fun-loving spirit and his serious side, and that fantastic past of his, and his strange memory and odd, inspiring mind. A rare companion, Anthony. And he and Bill certainly make a great combination.

We come into the story, as it were, by way of the back door. That is, we meet the pretty housemaid and the housekeeper of Red House first, on a pleasant summer afternoon. The maid is trimming a hat, and the two are engaged in idle talk—which is interrupted by a ring. Some one is at the front door. They know who it is, come to that. For isn't Mark's brother from Australia due for a visit after an absence of fifteen years? He wrote what turns out to be rather a nasty little note to that effect, which Mark had commented on that morning at breakfast. And as Mrs. Stevens so truly puts it, no one goes to Australia, much less stays there, without, as you might say, well, I daresay he has his reasons. . . . And a respectably brought up girl doesn't ask what reasons.

To be sure, when Audrey, the maid, opens the door to the visitor he looks like the kind of man who would have had his reasons, and pretty sinister ones, too, for going anywhere. Audrey can tell that in a glance. And he's rude to her, especially rude regarding her master, his brother, Mark. She shows him into the office, as they call the room where Mark does what work he ever does, which is make-believe enough, since he is wealthy and idle and only thinks that he can write, and since the management of his estate is so well done for him by his friend and secretary, Cayley, that he has no worries on that score.

And five minutes after brother Robert is shown into the office there is the report of a pistol. Mrs. Stevens, the housekeeper, hears it, and the two maids with her at the moment, and are frightened. And one or two other people hear it. Cayley, for one, who rushes to the door of the office, only to find it locked. He thumps upon it and calls to be let in.

It is just at that moment that Anthony, who is a stranger to everyone in the Red House except, of course, Bill, who happens to be one of the week end party staying there; it is just then that Anthony saunters up, to hurry his steps at the sound of the calling and the pounding and to enter immediately into the very thick of events.

For of course there is a body behind the locked door.

That is how it all begins. Step by step we follow the course of Anthony's findings, and there is more than one moment in the narrative that makes the breath come faster than usual, more than once when you feel like muttering, "Hurry, hurry!" Yes, it sweeps right along, and it doesn't sag for a moment. And always there is the charm of the easy, whimsical style, the delicious bits of wit, the sharply drawn pictures that make you feel so perfectly at home in the Red House. And Anthony is not the sort of detective who annoys you by making discoveries and simply humming and hawing about them, leaving you in the dark. No, what he thinks he tells and what he finds he points out. Perhaps that is because he never was a detective before. It is his maiden murder hunt. But, as he says at the end of the matter to his friend Bill, who is off for another country house party, where there is to be quite a number of guests, "Well, if any of them *should* happen to get murdered you might send for me. I'm just getting into the swing of it."

It is a horrid thing to hope for a murder, but you can't help just wishing that there might be some one, some one very undesirable anyhow, who would get murdered at Bill's next party. For then we should hear all about it and enjoy ourselves once more with Bill and Anthony.

It is wonderful to think what Mr. Milne has been doing for the last years before the Theater Guild showed us the first of him in "Mr. Pim Passes By," that success of last season. He writes as one who has written all his life, and that life a long one. Of course, he has written. Written for the English weeklies, been assistant editor of *Punch*—before the war. But here is his first book, following his first plays, each of which is a shining success. Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed? Would that the many beginners in writing could find it, and that other first books and first plays . . . However, let me repeat that here is "The Red House Mystery" is the perfect detective story. So what does it matter what the rest are or what their writers are doing? Fortunately, Mr. Milne is young, is at the beginning, and we are going to hear a great deal from him on and off the stage.

HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE.

WHITE AND BLACK. By H. A. Shands. Harcourt Brace & Co.

THE definite emergence of the negro problem as it exists in the South as subject matter for well considered fiction is a development of importance both to American literature, as literature, and to the welfare of the nation as a whole. Such novels as this by Mr. Shands, and "Birth-right," by T. S. Stribling (reviewed last week), cannot fail to stimulate discussion and may have no slight effect upon the current of thought that must eventually, lead to some sort of corrective, or at least palliative, action. Neither book has any solution to offer—there is no solution as yet anywhere in sight—but it is something worth while to have the problems clearly and forcefully stated. And the possibly reformative power of fiction is not to be underestimated: Dickens is not the only novelist who has brought about salutary legislation and created a saner and sounder body of public opinion.

Literature is a gainer by the frank introduction of subject matter that has hitherto been ignored, or if touched at all treated either flippantly or as a side issue. We have heard a great deal of rather silly talk about the "great American novel" some day to be written (as if Mark Twain had not already produced a "great American novel"), a novel that must be wholly American in manner and matter and in no way imitative. There is a good deal of nonsense in that idea, but also a modicum of truth. Here are two noteworthy novels that are at least emphatically and entirely American; and while neither can be

Continued on Following Page.